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Diverse Places of Learning? Home neighbourhood ethnic diversity and the ethnic composition of universities

- Students from the most and least diverse neighbourhoods tend to attend universities which have a similar level of ethnic diversity to their home neighbourhood.
- Within universities there is substantial ethnic segregation between different areas of study, and certain subjects have huge problems with ethnic diversity. This is particularly true for the arts, medicine and dentistry and veterinary sciences.
- The most ethnically diverse universities tend to be found in and around London and in the Midlands.
- Universities in Scotland and Northern Ireland are among the least diverse institutions, though in Northern Ireland in particular this is more representative of the local population.
- Universities in large cities are extremely varied in whether or not they reflect the ethnic diversity of the surrounding area. It is particularly arts and music institutions which are very White-dominated despite often being located in large, ethnically diverse cities.

Summary

The degree of ethnic diversity in UK universities is extremely varied, reflecting the broader ethnic segregation across the country. Student protests around the representation of colonial figures in historic universities, about the ethnic attainment gap in higher education and about the racism students of colour experience at university underline the political importance and sensitivity of this issue. In this policy brief we provide a statistical analysis of the ethnic diversity of British universities. Using data on students going to university in 2014/15, we reflect for the first time on how the ethnic mix of where students grow up affects the university they attend. We find that students growing up in the least diverse neighbourhoods tend to attend the least diverse universities, but that these universities are still more diverse than where they grow up. This suggests universities are, superficially at least, places of mixing – but also that many students will not have grown up in ethnically diverse areas. Students who grow up in diverse neighbourhoods in large cities are disproportionately concentrated in the most diverse universities, which are largely ‘newer’ post-1992 universities in London and the Midlands. Many prestigious universities and specialised arts institutions do not reflect the diversity of the cities in which they are located. We also provide statistics on the ethnic diversity of subjects at different universities, showing how ethnic diversity and segregation within higher education are subtle and complex.

Research findings in context

Students from the most and least diverse neighbourhoods tend to attend universities which have a similar level of ethnic diversity to their home neighbourhood.

- The majority of students from neighbourhoods which are in the bottom 40% of neighbourhoods for ethnic diversity generally go to universities which are in the bottom 40% for ethnic diversity. This is particularly true for students from the least diverse 20% of neighbourhoods. However, the vast majority of students from these neighbourhoods, which are White-dominated, will attend a university which is more diverse than the neighbourhood they grew up in.
- Very few students from these largely White-dominated areas attend the most diverse fifth of universities: just 5.5% of students from the least diverse quintile and 9% from the second least diverse quintile.
- Over 50% of students from the most diverse fifth of neighbourhoods attend the most diverse universities. The percentage of students from this neighbourhood group attending less diverse universities decreases as university diversity falls. For students from the least diverse group of neighbourhoods the converse is true – as the university’s diversity increases, fewer students attend.

- This strongly suggests that at the extremes, ethnic segregation at the neighbourhood level is reflected in university intakes. Other factors such as cost, attainment, desire and propensity to travel long distances to attend university will all affect students' likelihood of attending a university with a very different ethnic mix. Our qualitative research also suggests that students from ethnically diverse backgrounds and neighbourhoods worry about studying outside of London and the South-East on the grounds of racism they and others have experienced when leaving the capital.

Ethnic minority students are concentrated in the most diverse universities.

- As university diversity scores increase, the percentage of students from each ethnic group (except White and unknown) increases in a clear linear relationship. This is to be expected, given that the statistical method used to create the statistic is based on student ethnicity. However, there is significant variation **between** ethnic minority groups in terms of the diversity of the universities they attend.
- Students from Bangladeshi backgrounds were the most concentrated in universities within the top 20% for diversity, in comparison with other ethnic groups studied. Over 63% of Bangladeshi students are concentrated in these super-diverse, largely London-based universities. This partly reflects the concentration of the UK's Bangladeshi population in the capital.
- Black Caribbean students are the next most concentrated in the top quintile of universities for diversity, again most likely reflecting the concentration of people of Black Caribbean heritage in Birmingham and London.
- Chinese-background students are the least concentrated in the more diverse universities, though there are still more Chinese students in the more diverse universities.
- White students are just slightly over-represented in the least diverse fifth of universities but only 12.3% of White British students attend the most diverse universities. Many of these universities are 'new' (post-1992) institutions which typically have less research funding and are not targeted by elite graduate employers. This suggests a highly unequal system of higher education divided along lines of class as well as race, with White students largely avoiding these lower-ranked and more diverse universities.

Subjects are even more segregated than universities and certain subjects have huge problems with ethnic diversity.

- In 2014/15 Black Caribbean students accounted for 0.3% of all new medical and dentistry students in the UK – just 25 students. This was the lowest percentage of any ethnic minority group. In line with previous research (Connor et al., 2004), most ethnic minority groups were slightly over-represented on medicine and dentistry courses relative to their population in the UK as a whole – 64% of the cohort were White, 2.8% Black African, 10.9% Indian, 5.4% Pakistani, 1.3% Bangladeshi and 2.3% Chinese. This is not the case, however, for Afro-Caribbean students. Figures breaking down Black British identity more precisely

are only available for England and Wales, where the Black Caribbean community formed 1.1% of the population in 2011. Excluding Scottish and Northern Irish medical students, Black-Caribbean-background students still formed just 0.34% of all English and Welsh medical students. Clearly prior attainment and socio-economic background will affect these figures, and other research has highlighted the ethnic minority attainment gap at earlier stages of education (Strand, 2011) with Afro-Caribbean students particularly negatively affected. Bolliver's (2013; 2016) research has begun to explore the precise nature of inequalities of ethnicity on entry to higher education, but our findings suggest that further work is needed to examine unequal admissions to particular subjects by ethnicity. Even with the caveat of the lack of controls here, the fact that only 25 Afro-Caribbean students were accepted onto medicine or dentistry courses in 2014/15 ought to be a cause for concern – and underlines the need for further analysis.

- In 2014/15 veterinary science was 94.2% White, with just over 50 students from non-White backgrounds. Students from Black Caribbean, Black African, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Indian and Chinese backgrounds accounted for just 15 students, with most students of colour coming from 'Other' ethnic groups not recorded in the census. Though additional factors including prior academic attainment will play a role in determining recruitment to these courses, the enormous inequalities in the ethnic composition of key professional degrees highlight potentially major issues of equity and access which still need to be overcome.
- Looking at diversity scores for individual subjects at particular universities the patterns are more complicated. At certain universities, often those which are less diverse and/or geographically peripheral, medicine and dentistry is the most diverse subject area (Teeside and Plymouth, UEA, Exeter, Hull-York, Edinburgh, Newcastle, Cardiff, Oxford, St Andrews and Keele). In fact, for all but four universities (Warwick, Leicester, Queen Mary and St George's Medical School), medicine and dentistry are more diverse than the university as a whole. In inner London these differences are quite small, but in peripheral areas they are even more pronounced – with students on Plymouth's dentistry degree 2.9 times more diverse than the university as a whole. At St Andrew's, medicine and dentistry students are 2.33 times more diverse than the university as whole.
- Other subjects that tend to be more diverse than the university as a whole include law, business studies, subjects allied to medicine and, to a lesser extent, computer science and engineering. This does suggest strategic choosing on the part of certain ethnic-minority students, as well as highlighting the considerable segregation between different courses.
- For history, philosophy and language-related subjects, universities tend to have much less diverse intakes. Outside of the super-diverse universities of London and the Midlands, for most universities, these disciplines tend to be the least diverse subject groups.

Universities in large cities are highly varied in whether or not they reflect the ethnic diversity of the surrounding area.

- The universities which are the least representative of their surrounding areas are elite, specialised arts or music institutions. Those institutions with an arts, dance or music specialism are particularly unrepresentative of their local areas with much higher percentages of White students than is present in the local area.
- However, the University of Birmingham and the University of Leicester are both over 10% Whiter than their surrounding cities. In contrast, Birmingham City University, Aston University and De Montfort University are much closer to, and sometimes much more ethnically mixed than, their local areas.
- The most ethnically diverse universities in the country tend to be those in and around London. Of the 20 most diverse universities, only Aston University and University College Birmingham are not in London. With the exception of Queen Mary's, St George's Medical School and SOAS, all of the universities in the top 20 for diversity are 'newer' post-1992 universities in London – though the top 30 does include LSE, King's College and Imperial College, as well as Bradford and a number of Midlands universities.
- In contrast, the least diverse universities tend to be those in Northern Ireland and Scotland, as well as the elite arts, music and agricultural institutions already mentioned above.

Policy Implications

“Medicine and dentistry and veterinary science have particular problems recruiting students from certain ethnic backgrounds”

Our findings highlight the variation in the ethnic composition of UK universities and the segregation of certain subjects. Many specialised universities of the arts have very low ethnic diversity, despite their urban locations. Similarly, medicine and dentistry and veterinary science have particular problems recruiting students from certain ethnic backgrounds. These issues pose major problems of access, equality and social mobility. They also raise the question of whether or not universities are truly representative of the communities they are located in. Many 'civic' universities of the late 19th and early 20th centuries were founded, like the future polytechnics would be, with the aim of serving the local community (Anderson, 1995: 10). This local mission rapidly declined in favour of more traditional academic orientation and national recruitment. The issue of ethnic composition faced by universities like the University of Birmingham and London's elite arts and music institutes underlines the issue of how and whether universities truly serve and represent their local communities.

Our findings also speak to the experience of students of colour themselves once they are in higher education. The experience of racism at university which has been reported by other researchers (Dumangane, 2016) and the desire of students of colour to stay in more diverse cities for university reported in our own fieldwork underlines the need for policy change in higher education.

Universities need to take a more proactive role not only in student recruitment for particular subjects, but also in creating campus cultures which are genuinely inclusive, with curricula and staff that reflect the diversity of the UK. The diversity of certain subjects in peripheral towns and cities raises questions about the student experience of ethnic-minority students in White-dominated locations and universities. Students from the most and least diverse neighbourhoods tending to attend universities with a similar level of diversity to their home neighbourhood highlights the deep spatial divisions of ethnicity across the UK. Higher education sits within this context and must seek to address these issues not simply as a set of institutions where a superficial degree of mixing occurs, but as institutions which recognise the complexity, inequalities and racism experienced by students of colour when they attend university.

Policy Conclusions

Recruitment of students to medicine and veterinary science.

- Greater focus is needed on the ethnic composition of particular traditional professional degrees. For medicine and dentistry there seems to be a particularly extreme lack of Black Caribbean students, for veterinary science there is an almost complete absence of any ethnic minority students whatsoever. This has implications not only for the social mobility of ethnic minority groups into these professions, but also for the nature of the medical profession itself. Medical and health care workers need to reflect the diversity of the people and society they serve in order to provide the best possible care. Further research is needed to examine inequalities in access to particular degree programmes for students from specific ethnic minority groups. Very few students from these largely White-dominated areas attend the most diverse fifth of universities: just 5.5% of students from the least diverse quintile and 9% from the second least diverse quintile.

Creating a meaningfully diverse culture: diversifying recruitment to specialised arts institutions.

- Small, specialised arts institutes are particularly un-representative of their local areas in terms of ethnicity. As earlier research has highlighted (Burke and McManus, 2009; Scharff, 2015) the creative arts remain predominantly White; even in otherwise diverse universities creative arts courses are generally less diverse than the university as a whole. London's elite arts institutions in particular are failing badly to reflect the diversity of the city they are located in. If we wish to create a meaningfully accessible, democratic culture within the arts and avoid re-creating the White elite-ness of 'high' culture, serious change is needed in the recruiting practices of these institutions. This is particularly important given the locations of many other arts institutions away from the big cities, where students of colour may be discouraged from applying and the pace of change may be slower.

Teaching students from White-dominated areas about race and ethnicity.

- Universities are ethnically diverse places; even where universities are largely White they are still more ethnically mixed than large parts of the country. Given student anger and frustration at experiences of racism on university campuses, greater thought needs to be given to how White students coming from White-dominated areas are taught about race, racism and ethnic diversity.

Student recruitment is only the first step: transforming the culture and structure of UK higher education.

- When thinking about student recruitment and meeting targets for widening participation, universities should think about the effects for students travelling from very different parts of the country. This means embedding curricula and anti-racist educational activities that will create an inclusive learning environment for all students. For this approach to work, it must not simply involve cursory activities during the first term of the first year or paying lip-service to 'diversity' in the student body whilst maintaining employment practices which reinforce the predominance of middle-class White male staff. It requires a deep change in the culture of higher education as a whole.
- Teaching students about inequalities of race, class and gender needs to be incorporated into all stages of degree programmes as well as providing the principles for hiring practices and the way universities are governed. For the foreseeable future, the geographical spread of different minority populations will vary substantially across the UK and its universities. However, despite these geographical differences, universities must take up the mantle of responsibility: students are demanding change and universities must be seen to act. Getting students of colour through the door is not the end of creating inclusive campuses but is rather just the beginning. If universities in any way aspire to create a more socially just, equal society, then addressing campus culture and the legacies of Britain's imperial past within the UK's uneven geographies of race and ethnicity in the present is essential.
- Changing the culture of higher education is inseparable from a broader change in the structure of UK higher education. A system which funnels large numbers of working-class students of colour into under-funded, less prestigious universities cannot ultimately be resolved by simply allowing greater access to elite institutions and courses. The geography of the ethnic composition of universities in the UK is intrinsically linked to the unequal hierarchy of universities themselves. The struggle for greater racial equality in UK higher education must be included as central to demands for a flatter, more egalitarian system of comprehensive higher education (Todd, 2015; Gamsu, 2016; Blackman, 2017).

Future HE policy needs to respond to these structural inequalities – tinkering around the edges is not working.

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Data and Methods

We analysed data from the cohort of students entering universities in the UK in 2014/15. We linked this educational data to students' home neighbourhood (Lower Super Output Areas, or LSOAs, which in England and Wales have an average population of around 1,500 people). Using data from the 2011 census we then calculated diversity scores and the percentages of each ethnic group living in each LSOA; we also produced the same statistics at local authority level. We did the same with our university data to produce similar percentages and diversity scores on the basis of the 2014/15 cohort. To measure diversity we calculated Theil's relative entropy index for each ethnic group in every LSOA and every university in the UK. Entropy scores vary between 0 and 1, with a value closer to 0 indicating a highly homogenous population with a single group dominating the area or institution. Conversely a value of 1 indicates a heterogeneous population which is balanced across the different ethnic groups included. We also compared the percentage of students at each university from a White British background with the percentage of people from a White background in each local authority to provide a limited but straightforward analysis of how representative universities are of their localities. A similar comparison of entropy scores between universities and their local authorities was also undertaken and these two sets of comparisons can be examined in Table 1 of the Appendix of Tables, which is available on [the project website](#). The Appendix of Tables also provides the entropy scores of different subjects at university level.

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More about this research

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